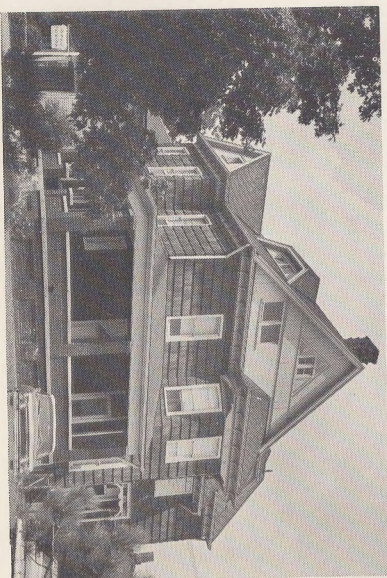
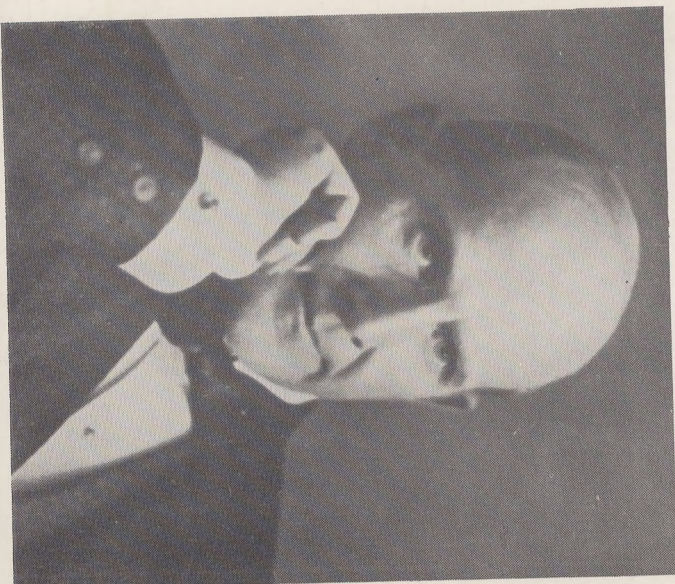




Eugene V. Debs In The Light of History

An address made May 9, 1964 at Tivy memorial hall, Indiana State University in dedication of the Terre Haute home of Eugene V. Debs, by Norman Thomas, successor to Debs as leader of the Socialist Party.



Debs' Home Today



Norman Thomas

It is an honor and privilege that the committee has asking me to speak on this opening of Gene Debs' old we dedicate to his memory and to the enrichment of heritage to us, to the living, and to generations yet to is a kind of immortality for those we respect and ciation with the enduring places and things which their lives. Thousands of visitors as the years roll convinced, be attracted to this house who otherw known little or nothing of Debs and his contribut You, citizens of Terre Haute who instituted this pr associates in its realization, deserve thanks of the nat us a kind of secular shrine. Here not only we, bu ations can warm their hearts in vivid memory of from the people and so greatly served them.

Gene Debs was a product of a French-Alsatian in and a crude, vital and hopeful mid-western townw 19th century. His father was a man of educatio home to be free to marry the woman of his choice Dr. Albert Schweitzer is Debs' first cousin.) Debs f of his father's type of European education and though he dropped out of the high school of his day lines-not all-he was actively interested in self-educ in public affairs and the art of speaking. He wa with all sorts of people. In 1885, by the time he twice been elected as city clerk and was sent to th lature. He was then by no means a socialist but he a labor man and the bills he introduced for labor

Wouldn't Run Again

When he returned home he told his devoted bro that he would never again run for public office! he married Kate Metzger of a family which had l ous. A good marriage, the town thought, but De different person from the man she married, but De loyal and faithful to her but continued to love he



Norman Thomas

It is an honor and privilege that the committee has given me in asking me to speak on this opening of Gene Debs' old home which we dedicate to his memory and to the enrichment of the American heritage to us, to the living, and to generations yet unborn. There is a kind of immortality for those we respect and love in association with the enduring places and things which were parts of their lives. Thousands of visitors as the years roll on will, I am convinced, be attracted to this house who otherwise would have known little or nothing of Debs and his contribution to history. You, citizens of Terre Haute who instituted this project and your associates in its realization, deserve thanks of the nation for giving us a kind of secular shrine. Here not only we, but future generations can warm their hearts in vivid memory of one who came from the people and so greatly served them.

Gene Debs was a product of a French-Alsatian immigrant home and a crude, vital and hopeful mid-western town of the middle 19th century. His father was a man of education who had left home to be free to marry the woman of his choice. (The famous Dr. Albert Schweitzer is Debs' first cousin.) Debs felt the influence of his father's type of European education and liberalism and, though he dropped out of the high school of his day, along certain lines—not all—he was actively interested in self-education, especially in public affairs and the art of speaking. He was very popular with all sorts of people. In 1885, by the time he was 29, he had twice been elected as city clerk and was sent to the Indiana legislature. He was then by no means a socialist but he was by choice a labor man and the bills he introduced for labor were defeated.

Wouldn't Run Again

When he returned home he told his devoted brother, Theodore, that he would never again run for public office! That same year he married Kate Metzger of a family which had become prosperous. A good marriage, the town thought, Kate was a very different person from the man she married, but Debs was not only loyal and faithful to her but continued to love her. I think Debs'

biographer, Ray Ginger, in his excellent biography, "The Bending Cross," gives a rather more accurate picture of their relationship, and the role of Theodore and his wife in it, than Irving Stone in his fictionalized life, "Adversary in the House."

Debs at 29 was a rising and popular figure, already a labor leader but of a conservative type. In 1888 he supported Cleveland whom six years later he was to denounce and defy. His life, however, was already rooted in the fortunes of the workers, in particular the railroad workers. Long before he was of age he had gone to work on the roads; he had been for a time a locomotive fireman; he had joined the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen after he himself was working at a clerical job, and he put his heart and soul, his talent as a speaker and writer, above all his ability to win friends as converts into building up that union—a task at which he was very successful. The union was of a conservative craft union type, but for the rights of its members Debs knew how to fight. There is a famous story of his trip to confront a high railway official in Columbus, Ohio, who had insulted one of his organizers. He took the man with him and stormed into the executive's office where they engaged for a long time in a shouted exchange of insults. Finally, the executive was so impressed with Debs that he not only settled the quarrel but offered Debs a good job—the sort of rise out of the working class which Debs always scorned—and, when he refused that, an annual pass on the road which Debs also refused, accepting only a pass back home.

Slowly the facts of life as he saw them converted Debs into an industrial unionist and he threw up his well paid position with what was then a well established union for the risk and uncertainties of leading an industrial union. The failure of some strikes by the separate unions contributed to this belief and the famous Haymarket episode in Chicago increased Debs' belief that labor must act and act vigorously for itself. He resigned as secretary-treasurer of the BLF but at its insistence continued for some time to edit its magazine. In that general period he thought of devoting himself entirely to a general labor magazine which he would start in New York. But he forgot this when he became absorbed in building up a great industrial union of workers, the American Railway Union. Its declaration of principles was admirably inclusive except that it was open only to WHITE WORKERS. How slowly has racial fraternity grown!

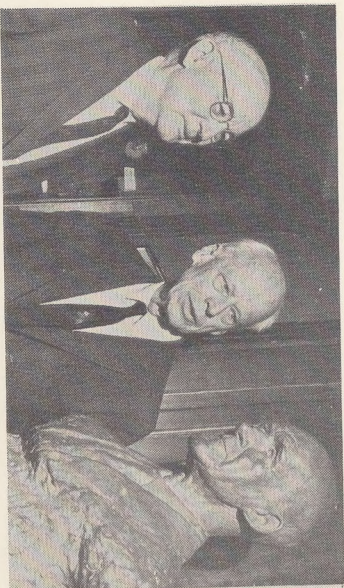
Dramatic Story

The rise and early success of the ARU was a dramatic story in which Debs played the outstanding role. Then came the Pullman strike of 1894. The ARU supported the strikers and, against Debs' advice concerning tactics, declared a general boycott on all Pullman cars on all roads. The roads were thrown into great confusion by the spread of the boycott and great public concern. President Cleveland used troops to break the strike or rather the boycott. Debs warned against violence. An injunction was issued against Debs and other leaders. Debs and others were arrested for conspiracy to interfere with interstate commerce. That charge broke down, but not even Clarence Darrow, then at the beginning of a notable career, could keep Debs and his fellow officers from going to Woodstock jail for contempt of court—Debs for six months. There the sheriff treated him pretty much as an honored guest. Every day he had a fresh carnation for his buttonhole. (Debs was a careful dresser.) He received visitors and carried on correspondence and much business from jail. There it is commonly said, he was converted to socialism, but in 1896 he supported Bryan

After 1895, Debs' role as a great union organizer, was ended, but by no means his devotion to industrial unionism. For the rest of his life Debs made his living by writing and lecturing and his primary cause was socialism. He was in great demand. He insisted on paying off the debts of the ARU which took him many years. He became a leader of the Social Democracy of America which in 1900 made a coalition—not yet a party—with an Eastern group which had broken off from Daniel De Leon's Socialist Labor Party. The coalition nominated Debs for President in 1900; it became the Socialist Party in 1901 and despite much factional fighting grew in strength until World War I. Debs was its candidate after the coalition became a party in 1904, 1908, 1912. In 1916 he ran for Congress in his home district. Everyone within the sound of my voice probably knows that he and the Party opposed our entry into World War I, that he was sent to prison for a speech at a Socialist convention in Canton, Ohio; that in Atlanta he got in 1920 a million votes for President—mostly, alas, protest rather than Socialist votes; that President Harding did what



Norman Thomas being interviewed by Harry Frey, WTHH-TV news director, on front porch from which Thomas preached Debs funeral.



Former President Raleigh Holmsted of Indiana State University and Norman Thomas view the Louis Mayer bust of Debs in the library of the Debs Home.

President Wilson refused to do, granted him a pardon. He resumed his work for socialism. But his health was failing and, even more than some of younger socialists, was torn by the great Communist split and all its implications. He very definitely came to the final conclusion that democratic socialism must reject Bolshevik-communism because of its totalitarianism and its cruelty toward dissenters from it. In 1926 he died and was buried after a great funeral here in Terre Haute. At it I had the honor of speaking—all too inadequately.

I have felt it necessary in our tumultuous and forgetful times to give this brief and colorless resume of a marvelously colorful life, partly in the hope that it will lead some of you to read McAlister Coleman's life of Debs or the more detailed biography by Ray Ginger to which I have already referred.

Appraise His Significance

Now I must venture to appraise this man's significance for history. I regret that I cannot speak from long and close personal friendship, for I, like Debs himself, came rather late to socialism. I knew him only after Atlanta when his powers still great—were somewhat failing and his continuing personal popularity had often a rather sad old home quality rather than that of a crusade behind a great leader. I shall never forget one night, after a meeting in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. when I had to wait for a train, and he, in better health than sometimes, talked to me quietly but vividly about some of the events in his life and their meaning.

The one thing I can testify to from my own as well as others' experience was his extraordinary personality. Earlier I have spoken of this, his old home, as a secular shrine. I did not mean that our beloved Eugene Victor Debs was in any sense a model of sainthood in a traditional sense. He was, I repeat, in many senses a product of the time and place in which he grew up. He had his share of faults and foibles. He found satisfaction, perhaps escape, in heavy drinking; if possible with a few companions. However, he never was an irresponsible alcoholic though at times he presented problems for his party managers and assistants on his exacting and exhausting campaigns.

To an extraordinary degree this tall, lanky human Debs, a leader of men was also and deeply their lover. He loved not only the abstraction, mankind, but the individual human being. Language, which in others would have seemed maskishly sentimental and even insincere was in him very genuine. James Whitcomb Riley's lines, so familiar to many of you, were not a mere tribute of a sentimental Hoosier poet to another Hoosier but truly descriptive.

"Go search the earth from end to end
And where's a better allround friend
Than Eugene Debs?—a man that stands
And jest holds out in his two hands
As warm a heart as ever beat
Betwixt here and the Mercy Seat!"

Debs himself meant every word of his repeated affirmations of refusal to rise—as well he might have done—out of the class of his fellow workers. He meant that while there was a soul in prison he was not free.

And this love for all sorts of human beings found response. Being simply his outgoing, generous self, he accomplished the unusual feat of winning the deep love of his fellow inmates at Atlanta and the warm respect of the warden and guards. Many of you will remember the story of the Negro lifer who wept when Gene left Atlanta saying "he was the only Jesus Christ I ever knew." Yet this man, like Jesus, could be a flame of fire in denunciation of hypocrites and exploiters of the poor.

No one can testify better than I to the remarkable hold Debs had on far more people than actively supported the growing Socialist Party. I was his follower—not immediately, for LaFollette came between—as Socialist candidate for President, and I can assure you that was anything but an easy job. For years after Gene's death men would come up to me and say in a proud if hushed

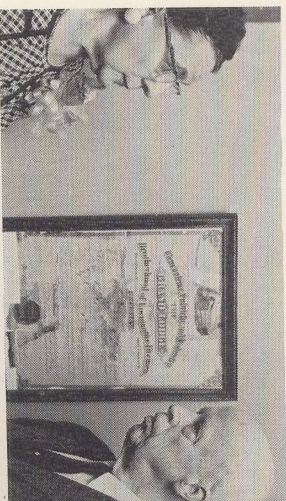
voice, "I knew Gene Debs." Usually they were men who have had at best hardly more than handshaking acquaintance with him. Yet in their hearts he remained their friend.

His Greatest Contribution

His greatest contribution to mankind was his personal found expression in his writing and speaking. That was in quality but at its best magnificent. His speech to jury after his wartime conviction led the great com Heywood Brown, who did not always admire Debs' style it, "One of the most beautiful and moving passages in the language. He was for that one afternoon touched with ins If anybody told me that tongues of fire danced upon his s as he spoke I should have believed." I should agree ex time of devotion to the ideals of which he spoke.

Debs' opposition to war in general and to the First W in particular was real. It shocked his Socialist principl Wilson had not permitted his government so ruthlessly with critics of the war, Debs, I think, might have follow Socialists in a quasi-support of it on the basis of the P more liberal aims and of the early Russian revolution not an absolute pacifist and some of his statements in of the workers against their exploiters certainly expressed kind of times to use or condone violence—usually, be kind of defensive violence against concrete oppression.

As a Socialist, Debs' great contribution was of himself preacher and teacher. He was not a great theoretician and who did such an outstanding job as labor organizer up the great railroad tieup was not an equally good socialis others. He attended no national nominating convention first one which nominated him. He was impatient of A and factional struggles but emphatic in his right as A best loved Socialist to express his own opinion rega party platforms and declarations which however, he wa in substantial agreement. Not all the party leaders rejo in they had to nominate him. He was not formally a C he belonged to no church and was generally critic churches. He thought himself a Marxist if not a Marxist but he kept a picture of Jesus in his cell. By some definit socialism was more Christian than Marxist but he was c ly a believer in the working class as a kind of surrogate manly. Henry Steele Commager wrote of him: "As and after him Bryan, thought that all virtue inhered in th so Debs thought the working man was the peculiar d of virtue." But not the working man who persisted in hated as narrow class unionism!



Marguerite Debs Cooper, daughter of Theodore Debs of Eugene V. Debs, and Norman Thomas view original of first union Debs joined in Feb., 1875.

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His Greatest Contribution

His greatest contribution to mankind was his personality which found expression in his writing and speaking. That was uneven in quality but at its best magnificent. His speech to judge and jury after his wartime conviction led the great commentator, Heywood Brown, who did not always admire Debs' style, declare it, "One of the most beautiful and moving passages in the English language. He was for that one afternoon touched with inspiration. If anybody told me that tongues of fire danced upon his shoulders as he spoke I should have believed." I should agree except that that speech was not miraculously inspired. Behind it lay a lifetime of devotion to the ideals of which he spoke.

Debs' opposition to war in general and to the First World War in particular was real. It shocked his Socialist principles. But if Wilson had not permitted his government so ruthlessly to deal with critics of the war, Debs, I think, might have followed other Socialists in a quasi-support of it on the basis of the President's more liberal aims and of the early Russian revolution. He was not an absolute pacifist and some of his statements in support of the workers against their exploiters certainly expressed a willingness at times to use or condone violence—usually, be it said, a kind of defensive violence against concrete oppression.

As, a Socialist, Debs' great contribution was of himself as friend, preacher and teacher. He was not a great theoretician and the man who did such an outstanding job as labor organizer up through the great railroad tieup was not an equally good socialist organizer. He attended no national nominating convention after the first one which nominated him. He was impatient of theoretical and factional struggles but emphatic in his right as America's best loved Socialist to express his own opinion regardless of party platforms and declarations which however, he was usually in substantial agreement. Not all the party leaders rejoiced that they had to nominate him. He was not formally a Christian, he belonged to no church and was generally critical of the churches. He thought himself a Marxist if not a Marxist scholar but he kept a picture of Jesus in his cell. By some definitions, his socialism was more Christian than Marxist but he was consistently a believer in the working class as a kind of surrogate for humanity. Henry Steele Commager wrote of him: "As Jefferson and after him Bryan, thought that all virtue inhered in the farmer, so Debs thought the working man was the peculiar depository of virtue." But not the working man who persisted in what he hated as narrow class unionism!

Died Before CIO

Debs died before he saw the rise of industrial unionism, particularly in the CIO, in which he would have rejoiced. To that rise and to the assertion of other than particular craft goals for unions Debs made an immense contribution, greater I believe than some modern Labor leader and historians of American unionism will admit.

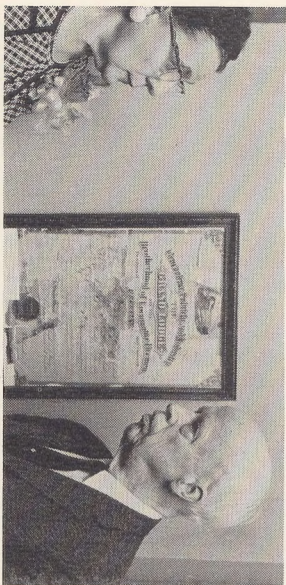
In the light of our present struggle for civil rights it seems strange that Debs tolerated the restriction to whites in the broad basis of the A.R.U. However he bitterly denounced many of the worst crimes against Negroes and his silence on adequate particular programs for civil rights could be explained by his overconfidence that the triumph of the working class in a socialist society would automatically solve all social ills. What I want to emphasize is Debs' general contribution to the rise of industrial unionism and still more to the humanitarian idealism of labor.

He also contributed very much to the coming and relative success of the New Deal although he died more than six years before Roosevelt's first election. What he and his fellow Socialists did beyond any seeming success of their party was to play a very large role in conditioning people to struggle for and gladly accept all sorts of social reforms which Socialists in their platforms called immediate demands. Thus they were pioneers for woman suffrage, direct election of senators, the income tax as well as most of the social reforms of the New Deal. Certainly neither the old parties nor the Progressives of 1912 were preaching them with equal fervor before such immense audiences as listened to Gene Debs.

What About New Deal

How Gene would have felt about the New Deal I have often wondered. His reforms were not achieved along the lines of his own thinking which was decidedly although peacefully revolutionary. They were not peculiarly the achievement of his sort of working class nor have they by any means met all the needs of our complex society. Yet in 1924 Debs supported our coalition behind La Follette who was not a socialist. I can still see and almost hear Gene at a post election conference which buried the idea of a farmer-labor party denounce the labor men who were pulling out. I favored the effort in 1924 and still think it was right although in action it further weakened our local and state organizations and, after Gene's death, added to the difficulties of the campaign of 1928.

What strategy would Debs support today? I have lived long enough to be skeptical on all such questions. Men as great as Debs had to be able to consider strategy and tactics in the light of changing times. What is certain is that Debs' vision of a truly co-operative society, a brotherhood of races and nations, and with it an end of bitter poverty and war, was never more important than it is today. His dream is our necessary hope as we love life. His own life should ever remain an inspiration to believe that we fallible men may yet learn to live together as brothers, controlling machinery and power far beyond any that he ever saw, for life and not death, for fraternal peace and not for war.



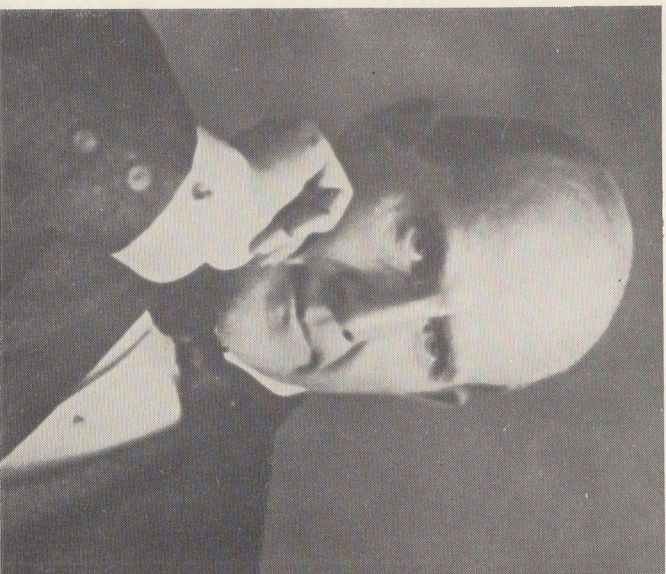
Marguerite Debs Cooper, daughter of Theodore Debs and niece of Eugene V. Debs, and Norman Thomas view original charter of first union Debs joined in Feb., 1875.

Mr. Thomas' speech will appear as the introductory essay in a forthcoming volume of essays on Debs written by men and women who knew Debs personally or whose careers were significantly influenced by him. The publication of the volume is one of the educational projects sponsored by the Debs Foundation.

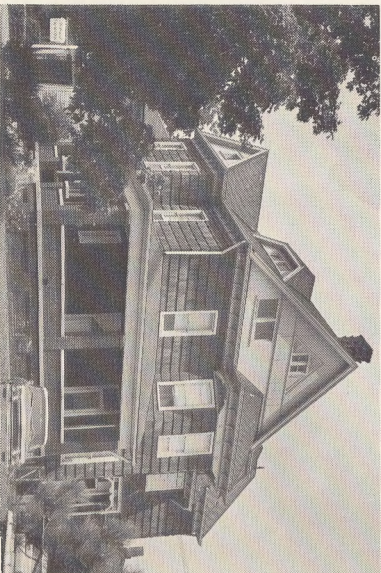


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